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Separated from parents: the trauma and lasting effects on the child's development

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## **Introduction**

Since April 2017, the Trump administration has been separating children from their parents at the border, but it wasn't until a year later when the 'zero tolerance' policy was enacted. From May to June, 2,342 children were separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border (Hegarty, 2018). Trump signed an executive order to keep families together, and a federal judge in California gave the administration 30 days to reunite family. The reunification took longer than expected, so some children were separated for more than 30 days. This separation can have several health implications on a child's development. This has caused a humanitarian crisis because the separation is inhumane and a violation of human rights.

## **Scope**

The area of interest is the United States Southwest border with Mexico. This is where we see a large amount of people migrating. This region spans several US states, including Texas, Arizona, and California. The main group of populations that is migrating at this border is from Latin-American countries, but for our focus it will be the Northern Triangle countries. Maureen Meyer and Elyssa Pachico write this triangle is three of Central America's countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (2018). These three countries are where we see the biggest increase in a population seeking asylum. There are also many people that are coming from Mexico as well, but when examining the rates of migration these three countries are showing the widest increase of migration in the past few years.

## **Prevalence and Recent Developments**

The history of controlling our borders is something that stretches back as early as 1904 (U.S. Border Patrol, 2018). According to the Border Patrol, the border was monitored by men on horseback to prevent immigrants from crossing, and in the 1920s they wanted to stop bootleggers

from smuggling alcohol across the border. The creation of a border was done to control the movement of populations and according to Coleman and Kocher this was done within the last 40 years. The US southwest border was one that became a militarized zone that included: “fences, walls, vehicle barriers, vehicle checkpoints, ground sensors, and most recently, electronic surveillance tours” (Coleman & Kocher, 229). Coleman and Kocher further explain the amount of people who were taken into custody and had immigrated to the US from 1991 to 2009 was 24 million. Of that total, 22 million people were at the US-Mexico border. The rates of immigrants also change depending on the time of year and the president.

US Customs and Border Protection website presents statistics of migration from 2013 to 2018 at the Southwest border. Most of the years have a similar flow with peaks in the spring and summer months and dips in the late fall and winter months. There are two years with the highest peak, which means there was a large amount of border apprehensions. In 2014, the peak was in May and June. The second highest peak is in 2017 in October. The trend of 2017 is different from the other years. There was an increase in the fall and then a dip late winter to spring that seemed to never pick up. This could be due to Trump coming into office in January and the following months the border apprehension was below 10,000. As for 2018, it seems to follow the trend of the years prior to 2017.

The next thing to understand these trends is who was president, and their policies that impacted migration. Barack Obama was elected in 2008, but did not come into office until 2009. According to Dara Lind, during Obama’s two terms he has the highest record for deportation of immigrants, over 2 million during his two terms (2018). In another article, Lind mentions how detention of families had not started under Trump’s presidency, but rather under Obama in 2014. According to Lind’s original article in 2014, a lawyer described the incident as a “shitshow”

because there seemed to be several irregular events happening. The asylum seekers were being denied due process and the judges in these cases seemed to be rushing the cases (Lind, 2014). Trump is trying to do something like this, he created a “zero tolerance” policy, which took Obama’s detention of immigrants a step further. If there were children that were immigrating with their parents crossed the border, they would be separated from their parents (2018). This separation was because Jeff Sessions, the attorney general of the time, wanted to prosecute the parents as criminals and in doing so parents will have to go to a federal jail. Prior to all this occurring there was a case that set the standard for detention of immigrants crossing. Dara Lind and Dylan Scott discuss the case. It was the 1980s and a minor, Jenny Lisette Flores, at 15 years old came to the US from El Salvador to live with her aunt who lived in the US. She was detained at the border and put in a detention center. This led to the Flores Settlement. According to Lind and Scott, this settlement was set the standards for detention of immigrants, but also for when an unaccompanied minor was in custody. The settlement also made it a requirement for the children to be released to a parent, legal guardian, or another relative. During the Obama administration, the Ninth Circuit ruled that the settlement covered more than just children who were unaccompanied, but also ones that were “accompanied”. According to Lind and Scott, the Trump administration was trying to find a way to overturn the Flores Settlement, specifically the restriction of how long they could detain a family. The Flores Settlement made it that families and minors could not be held for more than 20 days. This seemed to be a barrier to the Trump administration, so they went forward with the “zero tolerance” policy. This policy is something that separates the Trump administration from Obama and other presidents. Trump now wanted to separate and detain them. His new policy was now to prosecute every person who crossed the border. According to Lind, the Trump administration tested this policy in the summer of 2017

and continued till April 2018. The policy didn't really start to kick off until May till June. Over 2,300 children were separated from their parents. Due to public opinion Trump signed the "Affording Congress an Opportunity to Address Family Separation", an executive order in June 2018. This was done to keep families that families together while they seek asylum. The families would be placed in detention centers while they wait. In November, ProPublica published an article discussing that separation was starting to happen again. According to Ginger Thompson, when there is a risk of safety to the child then Border Patrol can separate the children from the parents. Since this was just released I was not sure how the government or public will address this issue.

### **Causes and Contributing Factors**

There are several direct and indirect causes that are contributing to the migration of people to the US-Mexico border. I want to explore these causes by considering each of the major migrators, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. There is a decline in the number of people immigrating from Mexico and that could be explained by Mexico's economy and how it has been improving (Leutert, 2018). According to the Central Intelligence Agency, Honduras is the poorest in Latin America and has the highest murder rates. Honduras also has a high population living in poverty, but are higher for those living in rural parts and for indigenous people. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, Guatemala is also a poor country has a high population growth rate, but also has health problems. Guatemala has a high population of indigenous people, that are "disproportionately affected" (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Central Intelligence Agency describes El Salvador as a country that has dealt with a high fertility rate, which lead the highest female sterilization rate in Latin America. They also describe that there was a civil war in El Salvador from 1979 to 1992 that lead to people migrating to US,

Canada, Mexico, and neighboring countries. There were several natural disasters that lead to people migrating from El Salvador. Leutert also claims that most people immigrating are from certain cities. In Honduras, they are coming from San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, which are two major cities. In El Salvador, most are coming from San Salvador and San Miguel. The reason that most people are coming from these cities is because of the “urban gang violence” from MS-13 and their rival Barrio 18. Leutert goes on to describe how there is violence against teenage girls, woman, and LGBT.

There are more causes that happened several years ago that have influenced the migration of families and unaccompanied minors. Jo Tuckman describes the violence in Central America from 2014 that causes families and even unaccompanied minors to make the journey to the U.S., and Tuckman also uses personal stories to learn more about why people are fleeing. There are also political problems, which was another reason people are fleeing. Kelly McEvers and Jasmine Garsd describe a different situation that has happened in El Salvador. The violence that is being done to girls is another factor for unaccompanied minors and families to be fleeing from Central America. This article shows the reality of El Salvador for teenage girls who are the target of the two gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18. These gangs did not get their start in El Salvador though. According to McEvers and Garsd, during the 1980’s when there was a civil war in El Salvador there was a migration of people, one was in the US, specifically Los Angeles, where the gangs were created. Over time many were deported back to El Salvador and in the process brought their gangs.

### **Controversies and Preventative Measures**

To study and fix migration an organization have stepped in, Human Impact Partners. The Texas Tribune is also helping immigrants by interviewing immigrants and their struggles.

Hannah Wiley writes for the Texas Tribune first introduced Human Impact Partners. Human Impact Partners created a study, Family Unity, Family Health. This study is examining the health effects of family separation in the Rio Grande Valley. This study focused on interviewing and surveying 200 residents in the Valley, and focuses on families that have been impacted on a parent that has been deported. It is similar to the family separation at the border, where a child is being separated from their parent. The separation is something these children will share. In the study, they discuss that the children are at a higher risk of PTSD when compared to other children in the US. The other health threat to the children is being exposed to toxic stress. According to Jack Shonkoff and their colleagues, toxic stress is third type of stress discussed and the most hazardous. It is defined as “strong, frequent and prolonged activation of the stress response system in the absence of the buffering protection of a supportive adult relationship” (e236, 2018). Toxic stress disrupts the brain and other organs, which can affect a brain that is still developing. This is done when there is an increase of stress hormones disrupting the structure. Shonkoff discusses that the receptors that recognize these stress hormones, glucocorticoid receptors, when abundant are found in three parts of the brain and can alter the size and structure of these areas. These areas are related to learning, memory, and decision-making functioning. Toxic stress is also related to Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs). This is when a child is exposed to risk factors like abuse and neglect that they are at a higher risk of health issues. Family Unity, Family Health also discuss that immigrant children face more stress at school, which will impact their ability to succeed. Something Family Unity, Family Health do to address these possible risks that children are exposed to is recommendations to help. They want there to be a public health approach that includes law enforcement and legislation.

### **Health Implications**

Why should one care about the family separation? First, there is a bond that a child has with their parent or parents. This bond helps form attachments to their parents and other caregivers, but also has effects on the child's development. By separating parents from their children that disrupts the bond and can cause further harm to the child's development. Attachment was first understood by Bowlby when he studied primates in the late 1960s, but Mary Ainsworth worked with colleagues on the Strange Situation Procedure (Reisz, 2018). This resulted in a way of identifying several types of child-caregiver attachments. According to Reisz and her colleagues, "the secure pattern was characterized by the infant displaying distress on separation from the caregiver, pleasure on reunion, and a capacity to make use of the caregiver's comfort to readily return to play" (2018). Reisz also notes that Ainsworth identified two other patterns that were classified as insecure patterns of attachment, insecure-avoidant pattern and resistant-ambivalence pattern. Reisz describes insecure-avoidant pattern as "infants masking their distress through focusing their attention on the external environment, such as toys, and away from the caregiver" (2018). Resistant-ambivalence is described as "infants show persistent distress and/or anger at the prospect of caregiver unavailability, such that they are often unable to return to play after reunion" (Reisz, 2018). There was a fourth attachment pattern presented by Main and Solomon called disorganized, which involves a variety of behaviors ranging "display of contradictory behavior; undirected, misdirected, or incomplete movements; freezing or stilling; display of apprehension of the caregiver; and overt signs of disorientation" (2018). Describing these attachment theories are important to understand because a child might initially have a secure attachment to parent, but they become separated they might develop a different attachment. Reisz discusses how Bowlby feared what might happen to a child if they develop the disorganized attachment and in his unpublished work he discusses three pathways. The first is



“threat conflict”. This is when an infant and caregiver have a disruption in forming an attachment that this will lead to disorganized attachment. The second pathway is “safe haven ambiguity”. This is when an infant seeks a safe haven with a caregiver the infant has ambiguity. The third pathway is “activation without assuagement”. According to Reisz, this is because of “care or custody proceedings involving sustained separation from a parent can themselves result in the disorganized behaviors” (2018). This is suggesting that if a caregiver and their child are separated it could lead to disorganized attachment. Disorganized attachment might cause a child to be exposed to Toxic stress. This was something I discussed in a previous section. Allison Abrams discusses that children who are immigrating are already exposed to the stress of the journey of leaving their country and traveling. These children might be exposed to hazardous situations and limited resources. Then when they reach the border to be separated might expose the child to more stress. Abrams also discusses how children who are exposed to trauma, such as separation are at a higher risk of mental health disorders, which is related to ACES. Discussed in the previous section was children who had deported parents were at a higher risk of PTSD and toxic stress. Toxic stress was related to ACES. ACES describe how certain trauma children experience can lead to long term health outcome. Since family separation at the border is recent event I think looking at the Family Unity, Family Health study to describe as some potential health risks to these children being separated at the border. Children who have had their parent deported is a type of separation similar to what is happening to children at the border. There is a separation of the caregiver and the child. How it might be different is that children at the border are being placed in foster care or detention centers. This study is significant in introducing the potential health risks facing children that are separated from their parents, whether it be deportations or at the border.

### **Potential Solutions**

The next steps for child separation is that this act should stop. It is more important to keep families together. This is important when people are crossing the border and for deportations. The first type of solution is to be aware and educated why people are migrating to the US. Migration of people will not be something that goes away. According to Silove and their colleagues, during World War II there were people fleeing their country because of persecution and in a twenty-nine-year span (1980-1999) there were over five million people seeking asylum all over the world. How countries responded was to hold these people in prison or detention. Silove suggests that there should be an alternative to detain asylum seekers. This is about human rights.

Another solution is to examine how policies might impact a family. We need to make sure people are able to apply for asylum. According to A.J. Willingham the process to apply for asylum is rather cumbersome. First the person must get an application that is a total of 26 pages long. A hurdle they might face is that they have to have a “reliable address” where they must be contacted. After applied they is a “biometric appointment”, which can only be done at application support centers. At this appointment they are fingerprinted, photographed, and have to verify their application documents. The amount of these centers varies in each state, which California and Texas have the most offices. The next step is an interview, at an asylum office, that has to be done within 21 days of the application being turned in. There are only eight offices in the whole country. Another hurdle is accessibility and travel. For example, there are two offices in California that service five states. After the interview, it is a waiting game. This could take as long as six months. After the final decision, there is no way to challenge it. This whole process might impact a family in their ability to work and provide for their family. Another issue

is if they bring their family here and apply for asylum and are denied. The family must then return to their country, which they were fleeing.

Allison Abram suggests that there might be consequences to society because of the separation of children at the border. When subjecting children to trauma early in their development that could be circumstance for them ending up in one or more welfare systems.

### **Conclusion**

How we go forward for subsequent immigrations into the United States will likely change under each president, however the previous practice of separation and detention of immigrants should not have been used. The risk of negative health implications to the children is one of the biggest outcomes of these practices. This can be done by implementing policies and educating the public is a resolution to helping these children and the ones that whose parents were deported.

Since writing this paper there have been more cases of child separation from their guardians. That is why it is important to understand the implications of these cruel actions. I hope to continue research in these implications and how we can change theses practices.

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